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MR. BUTLER'S REMARKS
AT THE DINNER OF THE
SEMI-CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION
OF -
MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE.



Aug 1850

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R E M A R K S .

"THE SCHOLAR: As Civilization advances, the pupil of Learning is the Master of Art."

MR. PRESIDENT:—This Toast embodies one of the convictions nearest my heart. During the few minutes I speak, I will confine my remarks to *one* of the modes, through which the consummation prophesied in the sentiment just uttered, must be attained, namely, *through scholars delighting to honor whatsoever things are excellent*. Opposed to such a generous appreciation stand various prejudices, which the man bent on the highest culture will withstand even unto the uttermost. Most of these prejudices have their origin in a narrowness of mind, that seeks truth in its own little homestead, and nowhere else. Thus we are prone to view our country as the celestial empire and all foreigners as outer barbarians, though the ocean of knowledge has received tributaries from every land. Accordingly it is in vain for most Englishmen to travel, since like a snail, they are always at home in a shell of insular prejudices, or in a coach-load of luggage. Walking to and fro in Canada, they see England in the New World, and in this Union behold nothing but the turbulent spirit of democracy. The present age, when the ends of the earth see eye to eye, should it not laugh to scorn such arrogance? Yet how many among us cannot rise to the dignity of a national predilection, but are exclusive admirers of one section—North, South, East, or West,—of city or country, of one sect, party, calling, hobby, or college,—veritable brethren of that Dutch cooper, who swore that no man but a cooper should marry his daughter. A true scholar may ally himself to any party,—but will never sink to a partisan, blind to see wise and good men among his antagonists, forgetful that all administrations

—and all oppositions—are but a choice of evils, and that as the country suffers under the best, so it can survive, or shake off, the worst.

A man's own calling is prone to be a den, where he worships idols. Engrossing most of his attention, it is in his view the land of light, as a mole's hole is to a mole; while other walks of life, as to which he is in the dark, pass with him for lands of darkness. Were there more ministers, who, like Payson, read through Rees's Encyclopedia more than once, there would be fewer of the sacred order stigmatized as a clan or caste, touching society at only one point, or technical characters, the whole human being shaped into an official thing, and nature's own man, with free faculties and warm sentiments, extinct. Not only do the three professions fail to strengthen each other, as they would do did they join hand in hand, but few scholars have any professional brethren. Spite of legal, medical, and ministerial associations, scholars are almost as isolated as medieval barons, each on his own hill-top tower,—pelicans of the wilderness, owls of the desert, sparrows alone on the house-tops.

Nor are *sectarian* trammels less hampering than those of country, party, or profession. Every sectarian professes to have a monopoly of truth. For two centuries Protestant England refused to learn from Papal Italy the true reckoning of time, preferring to fight with the stars in their courses, rather than agree with Rome. Instead of co-operating as to weightier matters, where they coincide, evangelical denominations are still beginning battles as to matters concerning which Scripture speaks nothing expressly, while temperament, taste and education will make men differ. Nay, in the same denomination many are intolerant of an extemporary, and as many of a written sermon; many excommunicate a man for a shibboleth, though he have in him the root of the matter;—and no wonder, for they sometimes smell a heresy in the Lord's prayer,—since it says nothing of a Mediator.

But as to nothing are scholars so prone to narrow their minds, as to their favorite study or darling idea. Here is a man of facts, who can do nothing but accumulate

facts, counting system-makers as dreamers. Would that he could feel his collections to be a rope of sand, till like be joined to like ; a mob, till individuals are marshalled under species and species under genera, like soldiers in an army. Over against this practical man stands a theorist, who in a steeple-chase of speculation ranges beyond the flaming bounds of space and time, counting facts and fact-mongers as the small dust of the balance. He knows as if he knew it not, that all philosophers before Bacon failed, through building their reasonings on reasonings, not on observations ; that Newton's greatest discovery was delayed, for years, by a mistake he had fallen into concerning a single fact ; and that one false fact betrayed Lardner into his ridiculous demonstration, that to cross the Atlantic by steam is mathematically impossible. Thus men of theory and of practice stand affected toward each other, like the French engineers and soldiers in Egypt. The engineers thought the soldiers were machines, while the soldiers, when certain engineers fell into a ditch from which they could not extricate themselves, answered their cries for help, saying : "Where 's your plan ? Show us your plan. You surely do n't think we can help you till you show us your plan." Next we meet a mathematician asking concerning Paradise Lost, What does it prove ? as if no man were anything more than one of Babbage's calculating machines. And there stands a poet, pretending that his memory is poorer than it is, as if the elements of all his creations, however sublime or fairy-like, were not furnished him by memory ; the faculty which the ancients hence styled "Mother of all the Muses." Moreover, there are jealous lovers of excellence who, like old Hunker exclusionists, arrogate it all to themselves, and think that they are dispraised, whenever anybody else is praised. There is a straitest sect of purists who thank God that they are not as other men, because they never touch—a novel, or review, or work stitched in yellow paper. There are idolaters of the past, who in Dante's vision rose before him with heads so twisted that their chins hung over their back-bones. There are bigots who vegetate like rhubarb under a barrel, and see the world only through its bung-hole.

I need not say that a true scholar will shun all these arts of dwarfing, as the navigator shuns the beacon-fire, and that he will make his own, the truths these one-ideaed men have rallied round. When he sees monomaniacs rushing to contradictory extremes, he will reflect that each may be hastening to the niche he was ordained to fill, as the counterpoise of some other ; as in politics, oppositions keep administrations from trenching upon the constitution ; and as on board a man-of-war, marines keep sailors from mutiny. Even when constrained to view some of his opponents in the light of Philistines, left on the borders of Canaan, to prove Israel, he will still recognize them as needful thorns. If he be a Conservative, he will not marvel that others are reformers, since they know that revolutions are best prevented by reforms ; that every improvement is a change ; that the changes accompanied by the greatest evils have been the greatest improvements ; that the good is the enemy of the better ; and that the law of habit makes physicians let patients die according to rule, rather than recover through departing from rule. But if he be a Reformer, he will not marvel that others are conservatives, when they consider how many changes, rooting up wheat with tares, are no improvements ; how much movement is, as in a squirrel's rolling cage, without progress ; how many dream that even religion was intended for nothing else but to be mended ; how following the wisest movements of others may be as foolish for us, as Pharaoh's following Moses into the Red Sea proved for him. If he be the nursling of an Alma Mater, he will think it no proof of proficiency in liberal studies, to be incredulous as to the culture of Alumni, fostered by other mothers. Nor yet will he look askance at his country-cousins, self-made men ; for he knows that every ripe scholar has learned more by himself, than under tutors and governors, and that whatever is taught in Colleges has been learned more meritiously,—that is, in spite of greater obstacles,—beyond their walls. But if he be the architect of his own scholarship, he will be far from sucking the bear's paws of his own self-importance,—as if he had found a more excellent way ; for he feels his obligations to books, that had never been written but for literary institutions ; he has

longed for teachers who, like a light shining in a dark place, would have shown him, at once, what he groped for long in vain. He knows that for lack of such a clue many a docile youth, lost in wandering mazes, has found no end ; he knows that, though he has climbed up some other way, yet to be taught is the natural way to learn science, as to be an apprentice is the natural way to become a mechanic. Whether he has gained his learning in public, or in private, he will despise no man, not even those who despise him as an idler, and accent the word *Industry* on the penultimate syllable,—as if they thought there could be no industry save in the dust. He remembers that the greatest painter in ancient Greece, learned something from a conceited cobbler ; that the greatest engineer in modern Italy was saved from falling in his greatest achievement, by a common sailor ; that Shakspeare borrowed from ballad singers, wont to be classed with beggars ; and that Paul was a debtor to the unwise ; so that the head cannot say to the foot : “ I have no need of thee.” Moreover, he feels the paradox that “ faiths ascend ” to be no paradox ; since the cottages, not the drawing-rooms, of England were first to appreciate Bunyan ; the common people, not rulers and pharisees, heard Jesus gladly ; and the popular heart was prepared for the Lutheran resurrection of Christianity, a hundred years before any court, or monastery ; so that in very deed, things hid from the wise were revealed unto babes.

O, that we had this “ large, sound, round-about ” appreciation,—and that in this regard we resembled the wise artist. In his best moods he has no eye for the incongruities, defilements, and rents of time in a famous cathedral, but he is absorbed by its sublimities,

“ Till growing with its growth he thus dilates
His spirit to the size of what he contemplates.”

He must behold the mammoth-marvel of Rome—the Colisseum,—in ruin ; but he is careful to behold it by moonlight ;—by moonlight “ that softens down the hoar austerity of rugged desolation, and fills up, as ’t were anew, the gaps of centuries, leaving that beautiful that still is so, and making that which is not.”

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Were our appreciation of excellence thus expansive and fraternizing, hemmed in by no lines of state or nation; sect or party, bread-study, or lady-love study, the pupil of science would be the master of art. Let all scholars, then, meet and embrace, like Joseph and Benjamin, though one was reared in Canaan and the other in Egypt: let us not be more haughty than Naaman as to taking advice from a Jewish maid; let us have more of the spirit which raised a mortal to the skies, and less of that which drew an angel down;—though rivals in mind let us be brothers in heart. Then shall we boast more men of many-sided culture, compacted by that which every joint supplieth. The man of a single aim also shall be aided as to his pet pursuit. All science being interdependent, he shall seize some hitherto undetected golden chain, or *commune vinculum*, by which other departments are waiting to elevate his own higher than it has ever risen. Whether general or particular scholars, every steam-car will be a shuttle weaving closer the web of our congeniality, for we shall walk in the steps of Paul quoting heathen poets, of Bacon rendering unto the alchemist the things that are the alchemist's, and of Rome conquering the world by adopting the excellencies of enemies,—the Gallic sword, the Grecian shield, the Samnite discipline, the ships of Carthage. Whatever others may do then, let us spoil the Egyptians and far all the world.

There is some soul of goodness in things *evil*,
Would men observingly distil it out.

I beg leave then to propose this sentiment:—
“As we scholars to-day meet old friends, the world seems warmer; may it ever seem wider when we make new ones.”

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